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The Death of Venerable Father Libermann

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THE DEATH OF THE VENERABLE FATHER LIBERMANN

This article deals with two documents which I came across in the course of recent research in Rome. Both were written a few days after the death of the Venerable Father and treat of the succession to the office of Superior General. As they have never been published before, I feel they are of considerable Spiritan interest, showing as they do the upset and confusion caused in the communities of Rue Lhomond and Notre-Dame du Gard by the Venerable Father's death.

The first document is a letter dated February 12th and signed by all the Fathers in Paris. Addressed to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, it deals with the death of the Superior General and asks for a definitive confirmation of their choice of Fr Schwindenhammer as Superior General.

The second document, dated 2nd March of the same year was written in Rome by Mgr Bessieux, Bishop of Callipolis and Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas. Addressed also to the Cardinal Prefect, Filippo Franzoni, it too describes the death of Fr Libermann as recounted by Fr Lannurien and once again presses that the Cardinals give the necessary confirmation, taking into consideration the letter of 10th June from M. Bouix to Fr Schwindenhammer.¹

For two reasons the Pope preferred to wait until the year was up. Firstly, because not much time remained until the normal intervention of the Holy See was due and secondly, so as not to create a precedent with such a serious dispensation from the Constitutions. At the same time Rome was prepared to grant the Vicar General whatever particular authority he should need.

¹ *Notes et Documents*, Complements, Paris, 1965, pp. 189-190.

The particular importance of these two documents lies in the evidence they provide of the attachment and confidence placed in the directions and decisions of Propaganda in accordance with the thinking of the Venerable Father. In the true spirit of the Congregation they make their case frankly but are quite ready to abide by the decisions of Rome. Men are fallible and make mistakes but a filial spirit never leads one astray.

Despite his episcopal rank and the impression he had created in Rome, Mgr Bessieux's petition went unheard. "I have told you, wites Fr Lannurien, what a good impression Mgr Bessieux has made here for his ability no less than his piety". However in another letter of 4th June 1853, Lannurien reports these words of Mgr Barnabo, Secretary of Propaganda, "if Kobès is like Bessieux with his head in the clouds and knowing nothing of what's under his feet, he's sure to make mistakes".

The same Secretary once said to Mgr Bessieux, "Monsignore, when I came to Rome I was a simple man like you; now I follow the principle that all who come to see me, bishops included and yourself no less, Monsignore, come to deceive me. So I am on my guard against them; I listen to them but I believe what I like."²

Writing to Propaganda in March 1852 Bessieux was not trying to deceive anyone and his letter is a model of submission to the will of God as mediated by the Pope's reply.

Lisbon, 10th January 1977
Antonio BRASIO, CSSp.

CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY GHOST AND THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

Paris 12th February 1852

Most Reverend Excellence,

In the midst of our sorrow over the death of our beloved Superior, Fr Francis Mary Paul Libermann we approach the Sacred Congregation with a request which seems important

² *Notes et Documents, Complements*, pp. 337-338.

to us for the prosperity and preservation of the work left to us by our beloved Father and to which he devoted himself with such zeal to his last breath.

According to the Constitutions of our Society, approved by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda on 11th March 1848, chapter V, art. IV, at the death of the Superior General, the members of the Congregation at the Motherhouse and nearby have to elect a Vicar General to govern the society for one year. Only after a year may we proceed to the nomination of a definitive replacement of the deceased Superior.

In conformity to the article of our Constitutions which prescribes the nomination of a Vicar General, we have unanimously (except for one vote) elected Fr Ignace Schwindenhammer to this office.

However, considering:

- firstly, that the article of our Constitutions which prescribes the nomination of a Vicar General limits his authority to the regulation of current business;
- secondly, that the present state of our Congregation suddenly deprived of a father whose words and presence were vital to us because of the respect and affection in which all held him, now requires a strong, well-founded authority to maintain unity and continue on the lines he traced;
- thirdly, seeing that the dispute with the Archbishop of Paris over the jurisdiction of the Congregation still continues, it would be dangerous to remain a year without a Superior General recognised and approved by the Sacred Congregation;
- fourthly, that our venerated Father before his death and at our request indicated Fr Schwindenhammer as the one he believed best suited to replace him;
- fifthly, that in conformity with the wishes of our Father the electors freely and unanimously (with one exception) named him Vicar General pending the moment when they could elect him Superior General;
- sixthly, that according to chapter V of our Constitutions, the confreres on the missions have a consultative and not an elective voice in the definitive election of the Superior General;
- seventhly, that providentially Mgr Bessieux, Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas is at present in Europe with

five other missionaries from Africa which would seem sufficient representation of their missions;

we of the principal communities of Paris and Notre Dame du Gard unite in appealing to Your Eminence to approach the Sacred Congregation for a decree dispensing us from the delay prescribed by our Constitutions and authorising us, without awaiting the consultation of our confreres on the missions, to proceed with a definitive election. Or else a decree which by its higher authority would alter the election of Fr Schwindenhammer as Vicar General to that of definitive election as Superior General.

Whatever the decision of the Sacred Congregation, it shall be received by us according to the spirit of our venerated Father with the deepest religious submission and as the will of God for us.

With the deepest respect and filial affection, Your Eminence, we have the honour to be your most humble and obedient servants,

L'abbé GAULTIER, *priest*; C. D CHEVALIER, *priest*; C. BRIOT, *priest*; F. LAVAVASSEUR; L. LAVAVASSEUR, *Father*; P. L. GUIMET, *priest*; DREANO, *priest*; L. M. GALLAIS, *priest*; L. LANNURIEN, *priest*; WARLOP, *priest*; EMONET; DELAPLACE Fr; J. LEMAN; J. R. BESSIEUX, Bishop of Callipolis *Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas*.¹

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To His Eminence The Cardinal Prefect Of Propaganda

Most Reverend Eminence,

On the occasion of the death of Fr Libermann, officially communicated to you by the confreres of the Séminaire du St Esprit and of Notre Dame du Gard, I should like to add a few details which demonstrate how precious was his death in the eyes of God. These I quote from a letter of Fr Lannurien, dated Paris, 4th February.

"Our dear Father suffered terribly. He was in agony for four days from the Thursday on which he received Extreme

¹ Archivio di Propaganda Fide, S.R.C., vol 7 (Congo-Senegal).

Uction until 3.30 on Monday. On Wednesday he told Fr Schwindenhammer and myself who were with him that he offered up his sufferings for Guinea. More than once he repeated *poor Guinea! . . . Monsignor Kobes . . . Monsignor Bessieux . . .* Then he recommended to us *fervor, charity, unity.*

"On Thursday evening when we were all gathered around his bed someone said: Father Superior, all your children are here. He replied: I am very happy to see you all for the last time. We asked for his final instructions. With great effort he said: *the spirit of sacrifice, zeal for the glory of God . . . and the salvation of souls . . . man is nothing . . . God is all.* He repeated *the spirit of sacrifice.* Then with great difficulty *Jesus, Mary, Joseph* and went on saying these words as long as he had the strength. Nothing else could be heard except these words though he could scarcely pronounce them. His eyes were closed.

"But, an hour before he died, his eyes opened and shone. A crucifix and a picture of the Virgin were presented to him in succession. He regarded them lovingly, his face taking on an angelic expression. He seemed in ecstasy as though witnessing an apparition. We watched him with ineffable happiness. Never have I seen a sight more beautiful.

"The seminarians were saying Vespers of the Purification. When they had begun the first verse of the Magnificat, our dear Father gently gave up his soul to Jesus and Mary.

"The previous evening at Notre Dame des Victoires, Fr Desgenette, having prayed for him with the greatest feeling, added: *how great my sorrow . . . in him I lose a friend, a model, a Saint.*

"We are preserving his tongue and his heart. Fr Lavavas seur and the other Fathers went with his body to Notre Dame du Gard.

"We are filled with a double emotion, a deep peace and confidence in our hearts and a great and holy sense of unity.

"You are aware that I (Fr Lannurien) had my hesitations about Fr Schwindenhammer succeeding as Superior. My preference was for Fr Lavavas seur, and Chevalier, Dreano and Gallais from Guinea agreed with me. Since our Father's death all that is gone and we now feel nothing but love and veneration for Fr Schwindenhammer. We have not the slightest doubt that the Father's choice was the wisest and best for the Congregation. Thank God for this and we now

unite ourselves with the request which Fr Levavasseur is making of you."

I am asked to request Your Eminence to ratify the successor of Fr Libermann. In the Congregation we have two men who could succeed as Superior General, Fr Levavasseur, director of the Séminaire du St Esprit in Paris and Fr Schwindenhammer, superior of Notre Dame du Gard at Amiens. The general opinion was that Fr Levavasseur would be the more suitable successor to Libermann and this was believed to be the opinion of our dear Father himself.

Levavasseur, knowing the mind of his confreres and not feeling himself called to this heavy charge, put the question to Fr Libermann before his death, asking which of the two before him should succeed him. Each made his case for not being Superior.

Our dear Father asked for two days to pray, then his reply was to designate Fr Ignace Schwindenhammer. *You*, he said to him, *are the one who must sacrifice himself*. Schwindenhammer's objections only served to confirm the choice as God's will for him. Father's words to him were *you can't refuse*. He charged Fr Lavavasseur as witness of his choice to pass on the news to the community.

When Libermann's decision became known it was accepted without dissent. Thank God for this unanimity about one we might not ourselves have chosen; we now feel the choice was the wisest and best possible.

So we request Your Eminence's approbation. I would recall that Fr Libermann began his work under the encouragement of the head of Propaganda and ever after Propaganda was for him the light, the strength, and the life of all the works he undertook for the glory of God and the service of the Church. He considered his communications with the Sacred Congregation a heavenly blessing on his labours, his sorrows and sacrifices. Any favour accorded to the successor he designated would appear as homage to the filial piety in which he always held the Sacred Congregation. For the one chosen it would be a special blessing on his work and for our little Congregation further motive for the gratitude, confidence and love we feel for the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda.

I request Your Eminence to consider the recent events within the Congregation as the work of divine Providence, re-

vealing to it that it can neither continue nor carry out its difficult tasks except under the direction and with the continual help and goodwill of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide.

Let it be for our second superior as it was for the first: that he begin his work with this Sacred Congregation, pursue his work with it and die daily with it.

A special link of affection for Rome stands out as the particular characteristic of our Congregation. On the missions we are constantly in contact with two peoples who share little of this affection – English Protestants and Portuguese Catholics both resembling spoiled children bent on a life of licence far from the Mother who calls them to virtue and holiness. Faced with such enemies whom she wishes to win for the Church and for God, our little congregation should feel a special love for Propaganda and be specially protected by it.

In these circumstances I beg Your Eminence kindly to accede to the appeal I make for the preservation of the Congregation in these days and I ask you to believe me to be, with the deepest veneration, Your very obedient servant,

Jean-Remi BESSIEUX, Bishop of Callipolis
*Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas*²

² Archivio di Propaganda Fide, S.R.C., vol. 7 (Congo-Senegal) ff. 335-336.